



How Witches Are Known

Samuel Wale Kumbiye | June 19, 2015

In my last post, “[Identities of Accused Witches](#),” I listed the most common identities of those who are said to be witches. The question for this post is, “how do we know and identify a witch?” Basically, the question is that of epistemology and it is an important one in dealing with the whole question of witchcraft belief. I will present and evaluate each way in which a witch is known.

1. It is a strongly held belief.

Witches are often identified based on the strength of belief. But how does one know if a belief is right or wrong? There have been right beliefs and false beliefs. What about the strongly held belief that it is the woman who is responsible for deciding the sex of a child? In many societies it has always been believed that a woman is solely responsible for giving birth to either male or female. But science has enabled us to know that females contribute only X chromosomes and men contribute either X or Y Chromosomes to offspring. If the man contributes X chromosomes to the woman’s X chromosomes, a female child is born. However, if he contributes a Y chromosome, the product will be male. Therefore the belief that women are the total deciders of the sex of offspring is false, even though firmly believed in by many. In Africa, women are still blamed for being the sole determinants of the sex of the child. The most unfortunate aspect is that to maltreat a woman for producing only female children is not only false, but injurious and unfair to the woman.

The belief that witches cause death, just like the belief that women determine the sex of offspring, may be strongly believed and yet may still be false. Simply because a belief is widely held in a community does not mean we should treat the belief as true. As I have taught this subject for decades now, many African students resent any effort to even question this strongly held belief. And yet if it is harmful to falsely blame women for the sex of an offspring, how much more harmful if we falsely blame individuals we identify as witches for the deaths of others.

2. Confessions are evidence that a witch caused the death.

Confessions are supposed to be an actual report of acceptance of responsibility to an action or evil committed. An accused robber on questioning can confess to actually committing the crime or the robbery. An accused rapist can confess to his crime. But we all know that there are some confessions that are made under threat, duress, torture, intimidation, pressure, etc. Some have even confessed to crimes that they did not commit just to get some notoriety. An old man in a neighboring village identified himself as a witch with the supernatural power to kill others, and his intention was to intimidate children with his confession that he was a witch. It is a fact that widows, orphans and the elderly have confessed to causing suffering and death after going through torture.

Years ago, my wife and I went to visit a young pastor who was sick and dying. He told us that his own daughter who was about six years at the time was responsible for his ailment. We saw the small girl outside. She had been beaten with sticks, and

a sharp razor blade had been used to lacerate her tender skin. Well, she confessed that she was responsible for the sickness and death of the mother and now her dad. The father later died. However, just before his death, he told his own family that he had HIV/AIDS. So definitely, though she confessed, it was not true that she caused the father to have HIV and AIDS. Actually, the father had been sleeping with prostitutes in the city and contracted the deadly disease. I have always wondered the lasting scar that will live with that girl until she dies.

Another story that is very close to me is that an elder woman from my mother's side was not only accused of witchcraft but was tortured brutally. They claimed she confessed to being a witch. The family male members beat her, caused lacerations on her skin with a knife, and sent her packing. She came and lived with my

mother in my village house. The fact is that she married and never had a child, and so her husband sent her away. Her father and mother had died and she never had any biological brother. Basically, she had no defense whatsoever, and was vulnerable to accusations, which of course she couldn't defend herself from.

These kinds of stories can be recounted over and over. The point is that there are many of these so-called confessions that are false and injurious and unfair. It is generally assumed that if someone has confessed to being a witch, he or she is to be believed. However, such confessions may be false. Moreover, even if the person did perform some actions intended as witchcraft, all that the confession proves is a profound belief in the effectiveness of witchcraft as well as a belief that witchcraft harnesses evil forces.

To underline this point: stories and confessions about witchcraft do not prove the reality and certainty of witchcraft. They simply affirm the belief in the existence of witchcraft. Though the belief in witchcraft attempts to provide a solution to the existence of evil in the world, the solution it offers is inadequate. Confessions or witchcraft are also hard to prove. In most instances, those accused of witchcraft are the vulnerable, such as the elderly, children, orphans and widows/widowers. Why is it that it is mostly the defenseless who are accused?

3. Witchdoctors know and can identify witches.

The major accusers of witches are witch doctors who claim they know and can identify these witches. The belief is that these specialists have a unique ability to detect witches. Usually, they perform some ritual and claim that they can identify

the accused. The question we should ask is, are their accusations indisputable? There have been many instances in which they have been proven wrong. Some

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of them have received bribes to accuse a perceived enemy.

Most of these witch doctors ride on the strong belief that there are witches out there who cause the suffering. All they need to do is point a finger at a person, usually a defenseless and vulnerable person such as an orphan, a child, or widow as the witch and it is a done deal. Even the prosperous ones can suffer the same blame if they are too rich or some tragedy comes upon them such as sudden death of a family member.

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4. Evangelists/Preachers identify witches.

There are many men and women preachers who specialize in identifying witches said to cause suffering. These preachers often claim that God or the Spirit revealed to them who the witches are. The problem is that people never want to cross check these preachers in their knowledge. The Church and people must be ready to examine the truthfulness of these preachers. The Church leadership, and especially current men and women of God who indulge in the practice have no way of being cross-checked or cross-examined by anybody. They act as police, who arrest the suspects; they act as judges who pass the verdict; and they act as executioners who execute judgment. It is nearly impossible for a church pastor, preacher, evangelist to accuse a person of witchcraft and for that person to be given a fair hearing.

There are probably other ways of knowing a witch which should be included in the items above. The critical point though is they all need to be evaluated. This is needed because it is unacceptable and unchristian to accuse a person falsely, and mete out undeserved and severe physical and psychological punishments on an innocent person.

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